ON THE NARA NATIONAL MUSEUM’S BUDDHIST PAINTING  

FUKUKENSaku KANNON

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This article introduces the Buddhist painting Fukûkensaku Kannon (Amoghapâsa), which became part of the Nara National Museum collection in the fiscal year 2000. Painted in ink and colors on silk, this work exhibits in both iconography and coloration the elegant tastes of the aristocracy during the Insei ("Cloistered Emperors") stage of the late Heian period (794–1185). At the same time, the painting contains transitional elements evoking the gestation of Kamakura-period (1185–1333) styles to follow. Such characteristics suggest that it dates to the last quarter of the twelfth century, at the end of the Heian period, making it the oldest surviving painted image of Fukûkensaku Kannon in Japan and an extremely valuable work.

The most important iconographic characteristic of the Nara National Museum painting is its similarity to the Fukûkensaku Kannon sculpture in the Nan’endô hall of Kôfuku-ji Temple, in Nara, which was the tutelary temple of the powerful Fujiwara clan. It is not, however, a faithful reproduction of the Nan’endô statue, appearing instead to draw upon a representation of the Nan’endô Fukûkensaku Kannon (Nan’endô-bon) included within a set of iconographic drawings known as Jikkanshô (Notes in Ten Volumes). The painting goes beyond the Jikkanshô imagery in its addition of a mandorla distinctive to the Kôfuku-ji sculpture.

Of special interest is the deerskin worn by the bodhisattva. Fukûkensaku Kannon is the honjibutsu (a Buddhist deity that is the true form of a Shinto god) of the Ichinomiya sanctuary of Nara’s Kasuga Shrine—the tutelary shrine of the Fujiwara clan, for which the deer is a symbol. The portrayal of eyes and a nose on the deerskin in this painting would seem to be a visual representation of Fukûkensaku Kannon’s association with the sacred animal.